

La Forza del Destino

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We had just started eating a little picnic lunch when the two came to the compartment. The small one stuck his head in the door and asked politely whether the remaining seats were free. Ours were reserved, *prenotadi*. When you “prenotate,” they seem always to give you the two by the window, facing each other. Those come with a nice fold-away table. Makes for comfortable snacking. We were spread out all over the compartment, though—the train was almost empty—so we gathered up our stuff to make room. Shorter guy kept his hand on the other’s shoulder while we cleared away.

Oh, no. I don’t think so. Italian men touch one another much more than ours do. Hell, they kiss—tough-looking guys hanging out in rough places, and one guy is set to leave, the gang comes by to kiss his whiskers. Hugs, too. I don’t think these two were gay. It just looked like the little one was worried about his buddy, taking care of him.

But they sort of ruined our lunch. The small one did, anyway: handsome young man, immaculately groomed, but a constant nose-picker. I mean he would put the whole soft white finger inside. No way not to notice. Clean nails, trimmed way back—or torn way back, since he bit them, too.

Also inspected what he had extracted. Rolled it with his thumb and picking-finger, and flicked it. Or sucked at his finger. My husband saw that; he wasn’t reading the paper while we ate. We quietly packed up bread, cheese, cold cuts, our bottle of mineral water, our half-liter mineral water bottle filled with white wine. So much for our nice picnic on the table by the window. We eventually ate at the Self-Service two cars up. Without much appetite, to tell the truth.

The smaller kid had a beautiful voice, deeper than you’d expect for his size. Resonant! But somehow silvery, too, you know? “Look,” he said, kindly, to the other boy, “Think of it this way—say you’ve lost her. O.K. You’re no worse off than I am. You hear me? Because I haven’t found her in the first place.”

“Ahhh!” said the tall one, and then a deep intake of breath, and a devastated shake of his head as he began to speak. “The world is cruel; there is no point in living; there is nothing to live for; no one to believe in; people you love are false!” His arm moved with every phrase; his hand and supple wrist shaped punctuation; his shoulders rose, then dropped at the *da capo*. “The world is cruel.”

He wasn't speaking loudly, but with what a quiver, with what emotion.

Tell me—you prefer Domingo or Pavarotti?

Yeah, me, too, really. Both are gorgeous. But old Luciano is an awful ham, sometimes.

Uh-huh. Right. That's what made me think of it. Anyway, the small one kept trying to buck him up.

"But Italy is full of beautiful women—nice ones, too,..."

"Uhh-aahh," with a shudder, now not even looking at the nose-picker.

"Nice! Good, true, devoted! Girls who would love to know a fine *ragazzo* like you. Look—I'll take you to Caserta. OK? So I can introduce you to a delicious cousin of mine there, a red-head! If we weren't cousins I would give my eye for her, and a heart as warm as her person is beautiful, and so jolly, and sweet—or if she's too outgoing for you, if you like more withdrawn, er... reserved, *ragazze*, she has a friend, a hidden flower, a girl of great charm, from a good family, the most cultured people, her aunt was one of my teachers when I was a child...."

My sex-bomb was reading *La Repubblica*. Hm? Yes—1995, the year we lived in Pozzuoli, near Naples. We read Italian pretty well, me a little better, but sometimes reading on the train makes me seasick, so I was just enjoying the ride. It's a great trip, up southern Italy after the ferry from Sicily, but that part had too many tunnels for good sightseeing, so I started listening to our neighbors. The Old Man and I can follow spoken Italian if it's not too fast or complicated.

No, there was no way to keep from hearing. Nobody else in the compartment, and a second class compartment on an Inter City train is quiet, comfortable—well, I could have tuned them out, I suppose, by thinking of something in English. But I love Italian, and I love that I can now understand it. And not eavesdropping. I mean, they were talking, not whispering. Talking and groaning.

"Oh-ahh! You speak of hope; I have no hope! How am I to endure this pit—this tunnel of darkness! With no promise, no light at the end to strive toward.... Ahh! To know, to be able to know, that at the end, when they muster you out, when the night is over, that at the end, a woman you love, radiant, waits, glowing, a beacon, giving hope, a promise—aahhh!"

Rip reads newspapers thoroughly—Oh? Rip? You know—Rip! The guy who sleeps through anything. Rip Van Winklestein. Except for the Italian political

news. He skips that. Neither of us can follow it—too complicated. I try a little. Anyhow, he had been reading *La Repubblica* since we bought it at the station in Siracusa a million hours ago, and he reads Italian slowly, but he had finally finished it, so he turns to the griever, the big guy, with a cheery smile, having reassembled *La Repubblica* as neatly as he could—it's a tabloid, but a pretty fat one, with supplements, sometimes—and asks him if he wouldn't enjoy reading it. I could tell he had thought through how to offer it most politely—he doesn't like learning grammar, but he knows how to use *volere*, “to want to”—he really learned page 223 of our intro-to-Italian text—so in midst of these crashing chords from the orchestra, in comes Happy Traveller, a character from the wrong opera.

And the *tenore*—he turns in mid-sob—he smiles this heavenly, sunny smile! Care-free! Says, “Yes, thank you. Most kind! Oh—would you like to read this?” And hands him *La Stampa*, as Dowell, my calculating but blind lover had hoped he wou.... Oh? Dowell? He's the husband, the narrator in *The Good Soldier*. Ever read it? Dowell thinks he's taking care of an invalid wife, and they travel from spa to spa along with an attractive English couple, and Dowell never figures out that his wife and the Englishman have been passionately screwing—.... No, no, I picked “Dowell” because my Great American Stud was being so damn blind. Or deaf. Not because I had the hots for the Italian boys.

Sure, they were cute. Haven't you always had a secret yen for a quiet, thoughtful, handsome, fair young nose-picker? The other one, the big dark kid, looked great, but who would want a youngster? Especially one who says, Don't speak to me of other women, how could I look at another woman, I love her so deeply—ah! her cruelty! For each man, heaven must decree it! For each man, I feel this is true, Heaven must elect one woman, no other, selected for all time, destined for you before time began!

Besides—a young guy wouldn't know enough.

Sure he does! My Man knows a whole lot. Think I call him “Sex-Pot” to be ironic? The Great Bald Hope.

Yes. After all these years. Every time I look over at that dear old dome with the fringe of furry hair just below it I think of his ...hmmmm. Heee! Now you know a dirty secret.

Yes. You're right. That's why I love to pat it. His head. And rub it lightly. He knows it, too, the bastard.

And he knows how to rev my old motor. Sometimes I can hardly—listen:

not on this train-ride, but on another, earlier, I got so I wanted to jump him, right there.

The hell I wouldn't. Look—when you have finally found—when you're lucky enough to have found the Great Good Guy, hell, you don't fight that kind of passion. Right? You and Joe have that, don't you? It shows! It's one reason we like you two so much....

You wouldn't, huh? On a train? Even if the Urge were really on you? Both? Ha. I bet you would. I would.

Have, in fact, "she said, giggling in shame." Or pride.

Well, ha, ha, neither of us is that naive. Right? I remember your first guy. However that all ended—Jesus, I know. Divorces hurt no matter what. I had two of them before I found...yes, two.

Didn't you know Freddie? Oh, you couldn't have—I forget.

Huh? Uh-uh. I don't hide him. Just rarely think about him.

What was he like? What was he like? Smart, elegant, sure of himself, a real shit-head.... I wasn't in love with him: I was in love with what I thought he was...represented.

No, my Tiger's past doesn't bother me. He says we're lucky we found each other, given how dumb we were on our first tries.

No, but I didn't mean just the sex. I had some minor complaints that way with those two. Freddie and Eddie. Fred and Ed. But only minor. Nothing like what I hear from friends. And he said that the sex was always good with his exes. In fact, I had to tell him to shut up, to stop talking about them: he had this dumb idea, when we were first married, that we should be perfectly frank, open; talk about our pasts. I kept my mouth shut. Anyway, his prior experience had been pretty pleasant for his women and for him. Sexually, I mean. Maybe it's just that he's sexy himself. Or that he *makes* it good, because he makes a woman feel so good, so that makes it good for him, too. Ha, ha. I know—you, too. Some of us are just born lucky.

Yeah. You're right. I know. Not born lucky. Smart enough to grow up. To learn a little about life and men.

Anyhow, we've come back to the compartment from eating our lunch in the Self-Service....

The Self-Service? It's a cafeteria-car. Better, in a way, than the old-fashioned dining car, because all the tables face the windows. The seats, I mean. The tables

are attached to the wall, like a shelf, in front of the windows, and you sit facing them. Because there were fewer tunnels for a while, and we were looking out on the coastline: towns, resorts, fishing-ports, castles, bays, rocks. It was nice sitting there. Like I said, the train was pretty empty; nobody was waiting for a place to eat, so we stayed a long time.

But when we finally returned to our compartment, settled back in, the high drama was still going on. You know, I had meant to talk about the two kids while we ate, but what with settling our stomachs from watching the repulsive...OK, I won't go into more details—and then getting absorbed in the scenery, I never did. Talk about all that dramatic conversation.

Because, you know, it's so different! You just can't visualize an American kid talking that way, even to his best old friend. Even to his brother, if he had one he was really, right? Close to. Can you? And even to himself—would he see it that way? Fate! The big kid talked about fate! And cried!

Also—I hadn't yet figured out that Clifford Pyncheon hadn't been listeni...Clifford? The poor brother in Hawthorne—*The House of the Seven Gables*, remember? He's innocent, he had been framed; he comes out of jail.... I mean, Rip Van Winkle slept through the American Revolution. Poor old Cliff slept through the Industrial Revolution. Or was in the slammer through it. But slept. Sleepy character. And My Guy was reading the Sports Section of *La Stampa*—actually, you know, he wasn't. Not the Sports at that moment. Because the next time he spoke, it was to show me—he started talking just as the tall guy's grief reached a sort of major climax—so—ha, ha, my goof, not hearing a thing, leans over to show me some real news that hadn't been in *La Repubblica* yet: Michelangeli, the big pianist—we have a good friend who worships him, melts when she hears his playing—anyway, he had died. Here was a full-page obit, with a couple of large photos and two feature articles about Michalengeli around it. And *La Stampa* is a full-format newspaper, so he'd got all this spread out, and now turns it so that I'll see it.

And I *am* very interested, because our friend's veneration is amazing, but just then, when we've got this huge sheet spread over us, the tall kid jumps up and stumbles—the train had rocked suddenly—as he tries to slide the compartment door open, and gives out a cry. Then he's out in the corridor, and the smaller guy takes his finger out of his snoot to follow him. The compartment door slides shut; it muffles sound, but I think I hear the big guy's voice getting higher, more hysterical. My kind old pudding is saying how sad our friend will be, and that we should save this nice obit and articles to give her

when we return to the U.S.

I push the paper toward him, quickly, but as gently as I can—I don't want to rumple the article—and get out the door pretty fast. They're way up ahead, at the front end of the car, through the push-door that leads to the entrance-space, both of them right at the sliding door that goes into that little noisy no-man's land between our car and the next one up. The smaller guy is stronger than you would think, pretty broad-chested; he's got his arms around the other one, his left leg braced on the near side of the door at the end of our car—the door is automatic, it's closed as far as his calf, and he's tugging. The big one is trying to tear open the seal between the cars, I guess to throw himself off the train. The train just then starts to shake; I'm lurching side to side as I hurry up the corridor. By the time I get near, he's managed to pull the tall guy back okay. So now the big one embraces him! Sobbing!

Then the big one rolls his dark eyes up and I think he sees me, so I smile and walk toward them. Small one, hugging him, starts to pat the other's back. They're in that little hall at the end of the car. There is an embarrassed moment of panting and staring. So I make like I want to use the rest room; it's right there. It's vacant; I go in and stand near the door, trying to listen. I don't hear anything.

Power of suggestion—the john is there, so I take a pee and wash my face in the No-For-Drinking-Water—that's not exactly what the sign said, but it was some sort of Italian near-English—and generally kill a couple a' minutes.

What do I find when I get back to the compartment? The three of them are having a splendid time with the great where-are-you-from where-are-you-going routine, followed by that famous patter-song, "How Do You Like Italy and Have You Seen This and That?" Jonah is clumping along in Italian—we're both terrible at speaking—but making himself understood. When he can't think of the name of a wonderful church in the *Centro Storico* of Napoli, he turns to me for help; I remember the name—San Lorenzo Maggiore—and so am drawn into the chatter. The chorus. The big guy knows that church, he visited it with a class on a field-trip when he was a schoolkid. There are Roman *scavi* underneath. So now three of us are briefing the nosepicker on places *he* ought to visit.

How wonderful that you have the time to travel so extensively in Italy; I have never been to America, but I have a cousin who has spent a whole summer with relatives in Providence; I can see that you love Italy, but wouldn't you rather live in America? You speak Italian *very* well! Our town isn't near

Providence. Our town isn't like Providence, but Providence is a city we happen to know; we like it; the Italian community is on what they call Federal Hill.

And when we leave, they walk up the corridor with us. Helping us with our bags, warning us to be careful of pickpockets in the *Metropolitana*. Handshakes, an embrace, plenty of Good Luck's and *Buon viaggio's*. I am certain that once The Barber of Des Moines and I get off the train, our compartment reverts to "La Boheme," "La Forza del Destino" and "Rigoletto."

I tell him what he missed as we sit under the Piazza Garibaldi on the *Metropolitana*, the subway, our bags packed around us. It's not crowded. He says, "So the girl said she loved him, but that she wouldn't wait for him 'till he came out of the Army?" After the first stop, Piazza Cavour, he adds, "At least it was grief, not rage and vows of vengeance. Right?"

The train sat awhile in the Piazza Amadeo station. I said I thought we shouldn't try to carry the bags all the way home—it's all uphill to our apartment—and he said that maybe the 118 bus would come along. Your subway tickets are good on buses too. The idea of transferring reminded me of the kids on the train again. I told him how their conversation made me think of the tenors. When he's moved, he'll talk nonsense. Free-form nonsense. "Suicide? Geez. I suppose at least it beats massacre." And, later, "Suicide 3, Massacre, 0." Still later, "Pavarotski?" Then, as the train slowed for Mergellina, our stop, he said, mumbling mainly to himself, "Pavarotski for a Dead Czarina?"

Oh. There's one other thing, a puzzle. Why they were there in the first place. It's a guess, but it might be right: I figure the smaller kid picked our compartment because he didn't want to be alone with his pal who was going into the Army. Because when Signor Oblivious, the light of my life, got restless and took a walk around the train, he had seen loads of empty second-class compartments. The two guys could have had a whole compartment to themselves, to stretch out in—the way we had before they showed up. Otherwise, why would two *ragazzi* come sit with a couple of old foreigners?

And the next day, the lover told me something I hadn't known. From talking to them about touring Italy, places to see, things to watch out for, whatever, he had gotten the impression—was pretty sure, actually—that these bosom buddies, the crier and the comforter, these

huggers, were not old friends. Had met maybe on the platform or in the station in the ticket-line. Hardly knew one another.